

Appendix P - Unlimited Submission and Non-resistance

Excerpts from:

A Discourse Concerning Unlimited Submission and Non-resistance to the Higher Powers, with Some Reflections on the Resistance Made to King Charles

Jonathan Mayhew, 1749

“If those who bear the title of civil rulers, do not perform the duty of civil rulers, but act directly counter to the sole end and design of their office; if they injure and oppress their subjects, instead of defending their rights and doing them good; they have not the least pretence, to be honored, obeyed and rewarded, according to the apostle's argument. For this reasoning, in order to show the duty of subjection to the higher powers, is, as was before observed, built wholly upon the supposition that they do, in fact, perform the duty of rulers. It is blasphemy to call tyrants and oppressors, God's ministers. They are more properly the messengers of Satan to buffet us. No rulers are properly God's ministers, but such as are just, ruling in the fear of God.

When once magistrates act contrary to their office, and the end of their institution; when they rob and ruin the public, instead of being guardians of its peace and welfare; they immediately cease to be the ordinance and ministers of God; and no more deserve that glorious character, than common pirates and highwaymen. So that whenever that argument for submission fails, which is grounded upon the usefulness of magistracy to civil society, (as it always does when magistrates do hurt to society instead of good) the other argument, which is taken from their being the ordinance of God, must necessarily fail also; no person of a civil character being God's minister, in the sense of the apostle, any farther than he performs God's will, by exercising a just and reasonable authority; and ruling for the good of the subject ... The argument here used no more proves it to be a sin to resist such rulers [tyrants and oppressors], than it does, to resist the devil - that he may flee from us.

Thus, upon a careful review of the apostle's reasoning in this passage, it appears that his arguments to enforce submission, are of such a nature, as to conclude only in favor of submission to such rulers as he himself describes; i.e., such as rule for the good of society, which is the only end of their institution. Common tyrants, and public oppressors, are not entitled to obedience from their subjects, by virtue of any thing here laid down by the inspired apostle ... Not to discontinue our allegiance, in this case, would be to join with the sovereign in promoting the slavery and misery of that society, the welfare of which, we ourselves, as well as our sovereign, are indispensably obliged to secure and promote, as far as in us lies. It is true the apostle puts no case of such a tyrannical prince; but by his grounding his argument for submission wholly upon the good of civil society; it is plain he implicitly authorizes, and even requires us to make resistance, whenever this shall be necessary to the public safety and happiness.

Suppose God requires a family of children, to obey their father and not to resist him; and enforces his command with this argument; that the superintendence and care and authority of a just and kind

parent, will contribute to the happiness of the whole family so that they ought to obey him for their own sakes more than for his. Suppose this parent at length runs distracted, and attempts, in his mad fit, to cut all his children's throats. Now, in this case, is not the reason before assigned why these children should obey their parent while he continued of a sound mind, namely, their common good, a reason equally conclusive for disobeying and resisting him, since he is become delirious, and attempts their ruin? It makes no alteration in argument, whether this parent, properly speaking, loses his reason, or does, while he retains his understanding, that which is fatal in its consequences, as any thing he could do, were he really deprived of it. This similitude needs no formal application.

It is not pretended that any person besides kings, have a divine right to do what they please, so that no one may resist them, without incurring the guilt of factiousness and rebellion. If any other supreme powers oppress the people, it is generally allowed, that the people may get redress, by resistance, if other methods prove ineffectual. And if any officers in a Kingly government, go beyond the limits of that power which they have derived from the crown, (the supposed original source of all power and authority in the state) and attempt, illegally, to take away the properties and lives of their fellow-subjects, they may be forceably resisted, at least till application can be made to the crown. But as to the sovereign himself, he may not be resisted in any case, nor any of his officers, while they confine themselves within the bounds which he has prescribed to them. This is, I think, a true sketch of the principles of those who defend the doctrine of passive obedience and non-resistance. Now there is nothing in scripture which supports this scheme of political principles.

Thus it appears, that the common argument, grounded upon this passage, in favor of universal and passive obedience, really, overthrows itself, by proving too much, if it proves any thing at all; namely, that no civil officer is, in any case whatever, to be resisted, though acting in express contradiction to the design of his office; which no man, in his senses, ever did, or can assert ... If we calmly consider the nature of the thing itself, nothing can well be imagined more directly contrary to common sense, than to suppose that millions of people should be subjected to the arbitrary, precarious pleasure of one single man; (who has naturally no superiority over them in point of authority) so that their estates, and every thing that is valuable in life, and even their lives also, shall be absolutely at his disposal, if he happens to be wanton-and capricious enough to demand them.

What unprejudiced man can think, that God made ALL to be thus subservient to the lawless pleasure and phrenzy of ONE, so that it shall always be a sin to resist him! Nothing but the most plain and express revelation from heaven could make a sober, impartial man believe such a monstrous, unaccountable doctrine, and, indeed, the thing itself, appears so shocking—so out of all proportion, that it may be questioned, whether all the miracles that ever were wrought, could make it credible, that this doctrine really came from God. At present, there is not the least syllable in scripture which gives any countenance to it. The hereditary, indefensible, divine right of kings, and the doctrine of non-resistance, which is built upon the supposition of such a right, are altogether as fabulous and chimerical, as transubstantiation; or any of the most absurd reveries of ancient or modern visionaries. These notions are fetched neither from divine relation, nor human reason; and if they are derived from neither of those sources, it does not much matter from whence they come or whither they go.

A people really oppressed to a great degree by their sovereign, cannot well be insensible when they are so oppressed. And such a people (if I may allude to an ancient fable), have, like the hesperian

fruit, a DRAGON for their protector and guardian. Nor would they have any reason to mourn, if some HERCULES should appear to dispatch him. For a nation thus abused to arise unanimously, and to resist their prince, even to the dethroning him, is not criminal; but a reasonable way of vindicating their liberties and just rights; it is making use of the means, and the only means, which God has put into their power, for mutual and self defense. And it would be highly criminal in them, not to make use of this means. It would be stupid tameness, and unaccountable folly, for whole nations to suffer one unreasonable, ambitious and cruel man, to wanton and riot in their misery. And in such a case it would, of the two, be more rational to suppose, that they that did NOT resist, than that they who did, would receive to themselves damnation.

If we attend to the nature of the argument with which the apostle here enforces the duty of submission to the higher powers, we shall find it to be such an one, as concludes not in favour of submission to all who bear the title of rulers, in common; but only, to those who actually perform the duty of rulers, by exercising a reasonable and just authority, for the good of human society. This is a point which it will be proper to enlarge upon, because the question before us turns very much upon the truth or falsehood of this position. It is obvious, then, in general, that the civil rulers whom the apostle here speaks of, and obedience to whom he presses upon Christians as a duty, are good rulers, such as are in the exercise of their office and power, benefactors to society. Such they are described to be, throughout this passage. It is manifest that this character and description of rulers, agrees only to such as are rulers in fact, as well as in name: to such as govern well, and act agreeably to their office. And the apostle's argument for submission to rulers, is wholly built and grounded upon a presumption that they do in fact answer this character; and is of no force at all upon the supposition of the contrary.”